[Ex-Industrialist]

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JAMES J. DUNLAP: EX-INDUSTRIALIST Original names Changed names

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JAMES J. DUNLAP: EX-INDUSTRIALIST

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As I turned off Main Street in Lawrenceville, which is one of Western North Carolina's mountain resort towns, I found myself in what, apparently, was real estate row. Five or six out of the dozen offices in the block had shingles hung out announcing the nature of the business conducted on the inside. The street fronting the offices was teaming with people: but nobody seemed to have business with the real estate agents. Cars pulled up. Passengers got out. But they locked their car doors and joined the stream of people moving toward Main Street or crossed the street and disappeared inside the post office. I gazed through the window of one particularly gloomy-looking office and wondered how the agents fared. Then, after a moment of hesitation, I felt the urge to step inside and find out.

On entering, I found the office contained several desks and several men, none of the latter of whom paid me the least attention. One who shamelessly sleeping, his feet propped, crossed, on the desk in front of him. Another sat reading a newspaper; and yet another sat pecking away at a typewriter placed on a desk near the entrance. Because of his proximity, I approached this man first.

He was a broad, powerful-appearing hulk of a man; and, even though he was seated behind a desk, there was not so 2 much the appearance of an agent about him as there was that of a forceful, picturesque cattle-baron of a bygone era. He wore a hat, as did the other men in the room. But his was broad-brimmed and black. He appeared to be well over six feet in height, with muscular arms and a barrel-like chest. Even seated, I could see that he must dwarf most men.

“How do you do, Mr....Mr....” I began.

“Dunlap,” he snapped, looking up. “James J. Dunlap.”

“Well. And how's business, Mr. Dunlap?” I asked.

“Business,” he snorted. “What business?”

“Why, the real estate business, of course!”

“Ask a real estate man.”

“I thought you were one.”

“Well, I'm not.”

“I'm sorry.”

“You needn't be.”

“Will you have a cigarette?”

“Now you're talking! Sure. Sit down!”

Over a cigarette, this man wasn't as gruff as he pretended to be. He was an agent, but he wasn't engaged in the real estate business. He was an agent for a Baltimore firm of clothiers that dealt in $16.60 measured-by-agents, tailor-made garments for men; and he occasionally dropped in here to write out his orders.

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“Nice of the owners to allow you to do that,” I proffered.

“Well, why the hell shouldn't they?”

“No offence.”

“I didn't say there was, did I?”

“No. Well, then, what is the reason?”

“You'll laugh when I tell you.”

When I told him that I wouldn't, he evidently believed me because his manner changed. He locked his fingers behind his head and settled back in his chair. His hard cynicism changed into a kind of bluff heartiness.

“Then,” he said, “I'll tell you. It's because once I was a client here. A damn good one, too. Right here at this very desk I once signed a contract to buy a $40,000 house which.....

“But look here,” he said. “I can't tell you about it in a few words. This thing goes back quite a way; and maybe you're in a hurry. Now if you want to listen, I'll go back to the beginning. If you don't - well, it's up to you.”

“How does it begin?” I prompted.

“Damn poor,” he said. “Literally, I mean. I landed smack into the lap of poverty the moment I arrived in this world. That was fifty years ago. Fifty-six, to be exact. I was born on a cotton plantation near Howe, South Carolina. No, we didn't own it. We didn't own a damn thing. Not 4 even a dog. My father was just the overseer there. That's all it amounted to. Just a title and a lot of rotten, hard, unprofitable work. And I'm telling you that it wasn't any fun for anybody. Take my mother, for instance. She had eight of us kids to care for, besides cooking for a dozen nigger field hands. Yes, she did! All that, besides canning and mending and cleaning up after her own brood. Why, sometimes, long after Dad came in from the fields, and after we'd gone to bed, we'd hear her cleaning up the supper mess or washing clothes so that we'd have something clean for the next day, sometimes, even, scrubbing floors by the light of a kerosene lamp. I'll not soon forget how worn out she used/ to look and then go out and outwork Dad in the fields, and him a giant beside her, too. Yet - and it's a damn funny thing - she outlived him at that!

“Yes, friend, they say there's more to a woman than there seems to be; and, recalling my own mother, I believe that. Of course, my father worked hard from morning 'til night, too. I don't mean for you to get the impression that he had it easy. He had to work if we were

to be fed. And the harder he worked the more he made. At least it was supposed to work out that way. It never did; but that was the stuff the owner fed him on. You see, he paid my father on a percentage basis, say a third of the crop or a third of the price it brought on the market. That's why he spouted that ‘harder the work, the better the crop’ stuff.

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“Now maybe under normal conditions that's the way it works out. But on that plantation, most years, the cotton was of the ‘Bumble Bee’ variety - thin, sparse, grade C stuff that yielded the grower far less than the damn stuff cost to plant and cultivate. You could work your head off and still not get results. That is, none except a hell of a lot of blisters. Farming be damned! Why, the land's nothing but red clay, tough and unyielding. It got my father finally, and he died.

“Now he had never saved as much as a penny - though how the hell he would be expected to is beyond me. So, to bury him, my mother borrowed some money. Where, I don't know. Anyway, she got it and buried him in a decent enough pine box.

“That much I remember about my father and my own boyhood. That and the fact that I went to school only three months of the year because that's all the State paid for. I don't mean to say that the school term was only three mouths. It was really six. But three months of it was free and three months was at the expense of the parents. Well, my family lacked money, so I went to school only during the State-paid term. I didn't think then, and I don't think now, that I was very lucky. I mean, even as a boy I wanted to go to school the full six months. Imagine that! Why, nowadays, these kids'd jump at the chance 6 I had. That is, they would under present conditions. But in those days, when I wasn't in school, I was put to work in the fields under a red-hot sun, and as my folks were taskmasters, it.....

“Look here, friend,” James “Dunlap suddenly cut in on himself, fishing out a pinch of tobacco and a paper, which he proceeded to roll expertly into a cigarette, “how much of this d'you want to hear?”

“Well, there's that $40,000 house, you know,” I prompted, assuming an attitude of renewed interest.

“You don't believe that?”

I assured him that I did; though for the first time I noticed that his nose was of a hue that bespoke frequent bouts with the bottle and that his ill-fitting gray suit was spotted and stained with a carelessness which I hoped didn't extend to his veracity. But any doubts which may have sprung from what I observed were immediately dispelled. For James Dunlap smiled indulgently at me, and, leaning across the desk, beckoned to a dour-faced man across the room. When the man came, we were introduced while Dunlap indicated what we were discussing, and remarked that he had forgotten just what he had paid for his former home.

“You mean that Main Street property?” Dunlap nodded.

“Let's me.” The dour-faced man pushed back his hat.

He was evidently making mental calculations. When finally he said, “It was around $44,000, with the interest, Jim.”

Dunlap evidently thought this verification to be quite enough, for he threw the dour-faced man a short “thanks,” and when we were alone again continued without so much as an explanation. “Where was I,” he said. “Oh, yes...

“Well, I was in the sixth grade when my father died. I'll not say I can remember everything that happened back in those days, but I do know that I quit school and went to work — had to, in fact, because my father's death was a blow, financially speaking, that our family wouldn't have recovered from unless I did. So I got a job in a nearby hosiery mill. The wages were small — six dollars a week — and the hours were long — seven in the

morning to six at night. But it was a damn sight better'n work in the fields; and I was getting paid for it! So there I was at fourteen, supporting seven kids and my mother."

He became silent, took off his spectacles, and yawned prodigiously. From behind the hand raised to stifle the yawn he remarked:

"Quite an order for a youngster, eh?"

"Quite," I agreed.

"Well, he continued, replacing his spectacles, "it didn't last long. Maybe about a year. After that, I was on my own. My brother found jobs. One sister married at 8 fifteen. Another left home to keep house for an old couple over in Howe. Between the five kids left at home they managed to make it easier for my mother than she had had it during her whole lifetime or, at any rate, since she had been married. As for me, I boarded out, near the mill. I had been away from home for over a year. And I didn't mind being alone that way.

"Of course, there was Jessie. That's the girl I married. She worked at the mill too. But she was all alone. She was an orphan — her folks were Hales, descendants of Nathan Hale. We were thrown together a lot and became engaged in the course of things, and, after I had passed my seventeenth birthday, and after I had been made a foreman at the plant, we set a date to get married. Sunday came around, that was the day she picked, and we set out. She had her brother with her. And what was more important, she had two dollars for the preacher's fee. As for myself, I scarcely had enough to rent a wagon to carry us to the Baptist church, eight miles away."

"How did Jessie's brother figure in your plans?"

"I was coming to that. Damned if he fit in very well."

"What did he do?"

“Well, first of all, he made a damned nuisance of himself all during the ride. He was supposed to act as witness for us. But he wanted to marry us. You see, he was one of those self-ordained country preachers himself, and 9 he was broke, and he wanted to perform the ceremony on the spot for what money we had. He badgered me every minute of the ride, like a puppy worries a rag. At first I paid him little attention. But he was so darned persistent that I finally weakened.”

“Did he marry you, then?”

“No. I figgured without Jessie. As long as she had gone that far, she wasn't going to be denied a church wedding. When I gave in to her brother, she turned on me and said: ‘Which'll it be?” A church wedding or no wedding at all?' That snapped me out of it. And it shut up her brother, too. We were married like she wanted it.”

Dunlap chuckled and settled his arms across the desk. “We must have made a pretty pair,” he laughed, and I was amused to see the pleasure which lighted up his face. “Just a couple of kids . . . Just a couple of damn fool kids.”

Once more he broke off. This time his mind off on a jaunt into a pleasant reverie, his jaws relaxed, his fingers idly tapping the desk top. He showed his age then. With the animation gone out of his face, the muscles sagged, allowing the skin to droop into grey folds that hung below each cheek like the flabby jowls of an aged hound. He didn't present a pretty picture.

Then he snapped out of it and leaned back against the 10 chair with a short laugh. “I was thinking about the good old days,” he explained.

“And after you married you settled down, I suppose?” I urged.

He nodded and said, “I did for awhile. But I wanted to learn all there was to know about the hosiery mill [game?], so later on I moved from one job to another, from one mill to another.

It paid in the long run, because about that time the war broke out, and there was a scarcity of skilled labor in the South. That's how I happened to settle up here. I mean there was a mill up here that wanted a skilled hosiery mill man and I came up to apply for the job.

“No, I don't remember just how it came about that I heard about the job. It's been so damn long a time. Maybe a friend wrote me about it — there were a lot of South Carolina boys working up here then. Or maybe I read it in the newspaper. Anyway, I left South Carolina and applied for it. That much I remember. And I remember the man who interviewed me. He was nice enough. But he looked me over and said he'd think it over, that he couldn't say for sure whether I was old enough for the job. You see, they wanted a superintendent, and they couldn't help believing that I was too young for the job. I was only nineteen. But I resented that crack about my age. I had a pretty good opinion of myself, to be sure. But, even so, I knew more 11 about the business than a lot of older men. As it turned out, they couldn't get an older man, so they hired me. They gave me a nice proposition, too: $40 a week, full charge of the plants and a chance to learn management. That last item was to mean a lot. I had no way of knowing it then, but a few months later I was to manage my own business.

“But to get back to that job. I made a good superintendent because I had learned how to take orders and carry them out, no matter what I thought about them myself. Some things didn't please, me, but I kept my mouth shut. I figured that was the easiest way to get ahead. And it was! It don't pay to cross the boss, because they figure you're a trouble maker and they get down on you.

“Like that time of the labor trouble. No, not at out plant. It hadn't cropped up there yet. But the minute the big boys at our shop heard about what happend at a nearby mill, they figured they'd be in the same boat unless they acted quickly. So one day I was called into the front office. “Dunlap,' the boss told me when I got there, 'I want you to begin weeding out the trouble makers we got working here. If you need help [md;] well, here's the names of a couple of mill hands you can trust,' and he handed me a slip of paper.

“Now, friend, that's all he said. But I wasn't a damn fool, even in those days. I got it from the first. He had given me the names of a couple of stool pigeons, and I was 12 to set up a kind of spy system. Then if anybody so much as spoke in favor of a union, or grumbled about the wages, or anything like that, they got slid out - nice and easy like, but nevertheless out for good. If somebody cut up about it, I'd have a little talk with him and point out that business was bad and his department just had to be cut down some. Usually it worked. If it didn't, then we didn't pull our punches. I mean, then we gave it to them straight and let 'em make the best of it.

“Of course, I went ahead and did as I was told. But that didn't mean that I liked the idea. It looked like a rotten deal to the workers to me. Still I wasn't simple enough to think anything I could do would break the system up. Hell no! Not as long as I was only a superintendent, at any rate. But I did make up my mind that that sort of stuff wouldn't go where and when I had more to say about management. And within a year I had that say!

“For less than a year later I had my own business. And it all grew out of the slump - the slump that came after ten whole months of the biggest boom the business ever had. I myself had no idea the slump was so bad. In fact, I had mp idea there was a slump until I was called into the front office. When I got there, one of the mill owners was seated at a desk signing some papers.

“‘Morning,’ he said when he saw me. ‘You Dunlap?’

“‘Yep,' I said. 'Anything wrong?'

“‘Plenty,' he snapped; and he handed me a long list of names. 'These people have to be laid off.'

“‘What'll I tell 'em?' I asked.

“‘Tell them business is way off,' he said. 'Bad. Understand? Bad - rotten. And look here, “Dunlap. You'll have to take a cut yourself.'

“‘And how much?' I asked, knowing just the same that no matter what it was it wasn't going to be all right.

“‘That's too much.'”

“‘I'm sorry.'

“‘So am I,' I said. “Here!” and I handed back the list. 'You fire them. I quit!'”

Dunlap paused, a look of satisfaction on his face. Evidently he had enjoyed the distinction of quitting when everyone else was being laid off. And I couldn't help smiling at the manner of his narratives in which he ably cast the other person in the lesser role.

“Smile if you want, friend,” Dunlap observed, incorrectly interpreting what appeared on my face, “but by quitting I was making the smartest move I'd made in my whole life. You see, I knew the business from A to Z by that time. So after I quit I got to thinking about opening a small business of my own. And even though times were kind of bad, one thing was in my favor: the slump had caused a lot of 14 the little businesses to fold up which left some pretty nice empty buildings for sale cheap.

“Presently I found a frame building that was just what I wanted. It could be bought outright for $500. Well I had $200 in the bank, so I took that and with $300 I borrowed I bought the building. Then I went out, and went to the machinery boys, and got them to install two machines on credit. So far everything was going okay. But I had to have raw material, and I had no more money. I mean, they weren't like the machinery fellows. They wanted their money on the line, especially on small orders. I went home to think, and think I did, and then I decided I'd take a long chance. I'd bluff it out. I'd buy all they'd sell and get the usual ninety days credit. That I did, and right there I played in luck. For just when I began

to operate, the slack suddenly ended and another boom came in. In thirty days the orders began to roll in so fast that I had to install eight more new machines.

“From then on I made money — big money. But not on finished goods alone. No, sir! Remember me telling you about the way I had loaded up with raw material. Well, I had bought that stuff when nobody/ else was buying, so I got it at rock-bottom prices. Well, when business picked up, the price of raw material jumped to two, even three times as much as it was when I bought. Besides, I had contracted for a hell of a lot more than I myself could even hope to 15 use up in a year. The thing to do was [?] plain as the nose on my face. I did it! I resold the stuff; and within ninety days I mad a cool profit of $40,000 on it alone.”

“And with that you bought the house?” I asked, concluding he had reached the point in his story.

“No,” he replied almost crossly, “I didn't buy — that is, not just then. First I made more money.”

I must say, as he told it, he did. Much more! His $40,000 went into the building of a larger, more modern plant on the outskirts of town. He moved into it. He doubled his crew of workers. He himself plunged into an eighteen hour day and within the year reckoned his profits at $100,000.

Then he bought the house. That, to him, was a matter of prestige, for by 1920 he had come to be regarded in the community as being substantially rich, and, accordingly, he thought it was about time to set up with wife and children in an establishment worthy of his repute. Right here in this office, at this very desk, he had made arrangements for its purchase. Right here he had handed the pen to Jessie and looked on while she affixed her signature below his. And right here, as he smiled at the nervousness of her pleasure, the

Dunlap ship, its sails gently billowed by prosperity, its passengers lulled by the serenity of the waters, seemed to him to be surely headed into the port of Contentment.

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But suddenly, and in the telling of it his voice reflects the dramatic import, the squall struck. Late in the year 1920, the bottom suddenly fell out of things. Industries, including his own, began to wallow in the heavy seas. Prices hit a new low. He saw his profits cut a third, a half, then altogether vanish. There before he had made huge profits on the resale of his inventories, now the lowered prices of all goods, finished or otherwise, in relation to the higher prices he had paid for raw materials in stock, threatened his extinction. Creditors, grown weary of waiting for cash settlements of their accounts, stepped in and took what they could get [md;] namely, finished good in lieu of cash. That is, some did but not all. Others clamored for cash and he finally met their demands, but not until he had mortgaged everything in sight, including his home, to do so.

With that he was left penniless: and when his equity in his $40,000 house had been lived out, he moved to a shabby house at the other end of town. Then, ironically, after he had been finally cleaned out as thoroughly as if a Gargantuan vacuum sweeper had passed over him, good times returned, industry revived, prices again soared, and in 1925 the house he so recently and reluctantly vacated sold for $50,000.

He just hadn't held on long enough; but, as a matter of fact, he couldn't, he reflected, and the years 1926, 1927, 17 and 1928, boom years for most everyone else, saw him deep in a current of debt and temporary despair instead of in the easy stream of general expansion and prosperity.

“How in the world did you get along after that?”

“How the hell do you suppose?” Dunlap's manner was gruff but his voice sounded affable enough. “I went to work. Or course, I got nothing but odd jobs for awhile; but a couple of years ago I ran across the job I've got now in a magazine advertisement, and I've kept

it ever since. Once before, though, I thought I had caught on with a good line. In fact, I did work at the job for about ten months. Even put a down payment on a cheap little secondhand car to get around in. The job was selling hosiery wear. But just when I was going good I got a letter telling me I was fired. Damned dirty trick, too. Saying business was bad when it wasn't that at all. I know because later on I met another salesman for the firm and he told me. He said I was fired because it was rumored that I was drinking on the job. Drinking on the job! That's rich!"

In spite of James Dunlap's serious appraisal of his own troubles, I couldn't help smiling when he added:

"And me never touching a drop either. . .

"Well," he continued, "I turned the car back to the used car lot and that was that. Then I took this job. It 18 aint much of a jog. The most I ever made in one week was seven dollars. In any case, though, it's a job, and with so many people out of work nowadays I think I'm damn lucky to have one.

"Needless to say," he went on, "I'm lucky to have the kids too, now that they're grown up. As I told you, there's six of them. Or didn't I tell you? Well, anyway, I've got five girls and a boy. Four are married. Two, that's Edna and Myra, the youngest ones, are still at home with Jessie and me, and a great help they are too. Edna, she works in a dress shop. Myra, that's the good looking one, works in an ice cream parlor. They each get eight dollars a week. Five of that they hand in toward keeping up the house. Three dollars each they keep for themselves. No, I don't know what they do with it, but they don't [?] around much, if that's what you mean. Once in awhile, they'll take in a movie, but not often. Most nights they come home form work, eat supper, dry the dishes for their mother, and settle down to listen to the radio.

"But they don't seem to mind. You see, they grew up after I'd lost my business so they aint used to fancy things. It aint the same with them like it is with Jessie. Somehow she takes

it different. Of course, I can understand why. You see, before I lost my fortune, I always made pretty good money and she was used to the best of everything. Now for the past sixteen years, having nothing like we used to, it's been pretty hard on her.

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“Before I lost my business, she used to have her friends over to the house for dinner or for bridge parties, and although she didn't care for night life or anything like that, she was happy and contented; but now, she doesn't entertain her friends anymore because we just haven't got the money to do it, and she doesn't go out at all, even though I know that every hour she spends in that shack is hell for her.

“You see, we've only got four little rooms, and we've had to sell most of our nice things; and Jessie has to do her cooking on a wood stove, so I guess she's kind of ashamed to have her friends in.

“As for me and the kids, it's different. We leave the house in the morning, directly after a breakfast of coffee and toast, and we're gone all day. Usually I got to run over to one of the mills and try to get an order, and than I drop in here and write them out. Afterwards, I pick up one of the old magazines here in the office, and if it's near supper time, I wait for the girls and walk home with them.

“That's the way it is except on Sunday. Then we all stay in bed in the morning. No, we don't go to church. . ”

And at this juncture, James Dunlap raised to his full height and languidly stretched out his arms.

I mumbled something appropriate for the parting and